



What Cathy Read Next

ABOUT THE BOOK

Spain, summer 1937. The civil war between Spanish nationalists and republicans rages. On the bloody sierras of Aragon, among Generalissimo Franco's volunteers is Martin Bora, the twenty-something German officer and detective whose future adventures will be told in *Lumen*, *Liar Moon*, *The Road to Ithaca* and others in the Bora series.

Presently a lieutenant in the Spanish Foreign Legion, Bora lives the tragedy around him as an intoxicating epic, between idealism and youthful recklessness. The first doubts, however, rise in Bora's mind when he happens on the body of Federico Garcia Lorca, a brilliant poet, progressive and homosexual. Who murdered him? Why? The official version does not convince Bora, who begins a perilous investigation. His inquiry paradoxically proceeds alongside that which is being carried out by an "enemy": Philip Walton, an American member of the International Brigades.

Soon enough the German and the New Englander will join forces, and their cooperation will not only culminate in a thrilling chase after a murderer, but also in a very human, existential face-to-face between two adversaries forever changed by their crime-solving encounter...

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MY REVIEW

The Horseman's Song is the sixth book to feature Captain Martin Bora but don't worry if (like me) you've not read previous books in the series because it's a prequel and therefore a perfect place to start. I'll warn you, however, that by the end you're likely to be adding the other books in the series to your wishlist!

The author has fashioned a crime story around the real life mystery of the death during the Spanish Civil War of poet and playwright, Federico Garcia Lorca, and the search for the location of his remains (which is still ongoing). I have to confess that, although I was familiar with the name Lorca, I didn't know anything about his literary output or his death.

In this respect, I'm in much the same position as Martin Bora when he discovers the body of Lorca. Unaware of the dead man's identity and the potential propaganda value to both sides of establishing who is responsible, initially it's the questions raised by the circumstances of the discovery of the body that fuels his interest in investigating. Only later, when he reads some of Lorca's poetry, does he find a more personal connection with the dead man. The same cannot be said for Philip Walton, in charge of the outpost of the opposing Republican forces. Walton's relationship with Lorca is of a much more personal nature, stretching back to a visit to America by Lorca many years before.

The clever structure of the book sees both men, separately and initially without knowing it, looking into the circumstances of Lorca's death. At the same time, they and their compatriots face one another across the valley taking occasional pot shots at one another, undertaking reconnaissance exercises or making surreptitious visits to the women of nearby villages. As the narrative switches frequently between the investigation and activities of Bora and Walton, it's as if the reader is perched on the mountain top keeping a watch on both camps.

Both Bora (German) and Walton (American) are outsiders, drawn to different sides of the Civil War for complicated reasons and carrying a fair amount of emotional baggage. They both have things they want to forget and events in their past of which they feel ashamed. The reader gets an insight into this intermittently through extracts from Bora's entries in his personal diary and through access to Walton's thoughts. What they also share is a history of strained relationships with women. As it turns out, the two men find themselves drawn to the same mysterious and enigmatic local woman who (conveniently) is free with her sexual favours with no commitment asked in return.

A prequel provides both opportunities and challenges for an author, although probably less of the latter than a sequel does. The opportunities include the ability to delve more deeply into the past of the main character, to explain the background to decisions or actions they may take in later books, to fill in more of their back story. In *The Horseman's Song*, the reader certainly gets a very extensive insight into the character of Martin Bora. The main challenge of a prequel is that the author can't change what is going to happen in later, already written, books. It's no spoiler to say that the reader knows that, however dangerous the situations in which he finds himself, Martin Bora isn't going to die in *The Horseman's Song* but, of course, he doesn't know that. Thanks to the skilful writing of the author, Bora's dices with death don't lose any of their impact. The book also contains some wonderful lyrical writing, especially in the descriptions of the parched landscape of that part of Spain.

If, like me, you're a fan of (the late lamented) Philip Kerr's 'Bernie Gunther' series, you'll probably love this for the historical crime element. Because of the setting, Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* also came to mind while I was reading the book. Part fascinating history lesson, part astute psychological study, part intriguing historical crime mystery, *The Horseman's Song* is beautifully written and has introduced me to a historical fiction series I'm sure I'm going to love reading more of in the future.

In three words: COMPELLING, LYRICAL, MYSTERY